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Published in:
Third World Quarterly

DOI:
[10.1080/01436597.2014.924064](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.924064)

Publication date:
2014

Citation for published version (APA):

Bliesemann de Guevara, B. (2014). On methodology and myths: Exploring the International Crisis Group's organisational culture. *Third World Quarterly*, 35(4), 616-633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2014.924064>

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On Methodology and Myths: Exploring the International Crisis Group's Organisational Culture

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[8,618 words]

Exploring the historiography of the International Crisis Group (ICG), this article looks critically at the narratives surrounding the organisation's self-declared success. The focus is specifically on the so-called ICG methodology consisting of field-based research and analysis, practical policy recommendations and high-level advocacy. Combining a three-level approach to the analysis of organisational cultures with Yanow's concept of organisational myths, the article argues that the ICG methodology contains a number of organisational myths that are meant to mask tensions/contradictions in the organisation's underpinning basic assumptions and values, which, if publicly discussed, may have the power to undermine its expert authority. The four myths looked at in detail are the 'field facts myth', the 'myth of flexible pragmatism', the 'myth of uniqueness' and the 'neutrality/independence myth'.

Keywords: International Crisis Group (ICG); knowledge; expert authority; organisational culture; myth; knowledge market; storytelling

Introduction

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a success story. According to its website, it developed from 'a two-person office in London, and a tiny field staff in the Balkans and West Africa' in the mid-1990s into 'the world's leading independent, non-partisan, source of analysis and advice to governments, and intergovernmental bodies like the United Nations, European Union and World Bank, on the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict'.¹ It has been celebrated by key figures in international politics lauding the ICG for its work. They describe the organisation as an 'influential and inspiring voice' and 'the eyes, the ears and the conscience of the international community', endorsing the organisation's mission and taking

up elements of its self-description.² Furthermore, non-ICG sources such as interviews with UN staff, WikiLeaks cables, media citations and academic publications on conflict areas confirm that the ICG has evolved into an oft-consulted, widely-read provider of conflict expertise with high visibility and recognition in policy and diplomatic circles, academia and the media.³

The ICG's success story of 'rise and power'⁴ is underpinned by four major storylines: its character as an organisation *sui generis*, staffed by highly committed individuals working for a good cause; the accurate and timely field-based research and analysis of its experienced experts; the practical usefulness and imagination of its policy prescriptions; and its high-level advocacy and influence on policy-makers that short-cuts the normal bureaucratic information and decision process. Of these four storylines, expert field research and analysis is fundamental in the ICG's self-narrative, because cogent policy prescriptions are derived from accurate field research and analysis, forming together a convincing argument as the main tool in the group's high-level advocacy. In the ICG's own words, the 'Crisis Group's credibility is founded on its field-based research'.⁵ Field expertise figures centrally in the ICG's self-description that sets it clearly apart from the standard western 'armchair' think tank based only in global centres of power such as western capitals and the headquarters of international organisations without any presence in 'the world's trouble spots'. As such, the ICG's field presence is a major source of its symbolic capital and underpins its status as hard-to-ignore expert in the conflict-related marketplace of ideas.⁶

This is complemented by an emphasis on high-level advocacy of well thought-out and flexible policy recommendations. Occasionally, they may be accompanied by media campaigns (to 'shame' policy-makers into a certain direction), but most often do not take place publicly because '[m]uch of Crisis Group's most successful advocacy is done behind closed doors, requiring access to policymakers in major international centres and in the regions where we operate.'⁷ In the ICG narrative, expert field research and high-level advocacy feed into each other. Programme directors in the field and their teams monitor the conflict areas, drawing the organisation's attention to new developments, and accurate field analysis builds the basis for practical policy prescriptions and convincing arguments at the advocacy level. Directors and analysts at the advocacy offices bring the field findings to the attention of policy-makers and monitor and report on major events in the policy world (summits and UN Security Council meetings, for example), which in turn inform the research and reporting schedule in the field programmes. Together, field-based research, practical

policy prescriptions and access to high-level policy-makers are what the organisation calls the ‘ICG methodology’.

This article looks critically at the ICG methodology and its underlying assumptions. Conceptually, it combines Edgar Schein’s work on organisational culture and leadership, especially his analytical distinction between three levels of organisational culture (artefacts, espoused values and beliefs, and underpinning basic assumptions), with Dvora Yanow’s work on organisational and policy myths in order to examine, more closely, the ideas that drive the ICG methodology.⁸ Excavating the underpinning implicit assumptions of the ICG’s culture permits a critical exploration of its explicit storylines and artefacts, which are manifest in the form of its information products. Through this lens it is possible to reveal three built-in tensions/contradictions in the ICG’s non-negotiable beliefs, or what Yanow calls ‘incommensurable values’, which are at the heart of the organisation’s culture and explain visible contradictions at the level of expressed values (mission, strategy, measures) and products (reports, briefings, crisis alerts). It will be argued that the ICG methodology contains a number of organisational myths that are designed to mask these tensions that, if publicly discussed, would perhaps raise questions about the organisation’s expert authority.

The four myths looked at in detail are the ‘field facts myth’, the ‘myth of flexible pragmatism’, the ‘myth of uniqueness’ and the ‘neutrality/independence myth’. The tensions/incommensurable values that these myths veil are tensions between problem orientation and success orientation in the ICG’s knowledge production, between its moral claims and its lack of a clearly defined moral standpoint, and between its claims of independence and non-partisanship that clash with its entanglements in the international policy community. These tensions are built into the ICG’s organisational culture and cannot be easily dissolved, and they explain contradictions in the group’s practices and products as well as why the ICG is lauded by some (former) staff members and outside observers and yet loathed by others. The ICG’s organisational myths, constantly reiterated and reproduced in its self-referential products, ensure that these tensions are not openly discussed, as they would undermine the group’s expert authority. As such they are often not recognised by knowledge consumers, who are unaware of their implications for the production of so-called truths.

Organisational culture and organisational myths

The culture of an organisation is both a 'set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behavior' (a relatively stable structure defining what actors can legitimately do) and at the same time 'a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behavior'.⁹ As a structure, it consists of shared basic assumptions acquired by a group over time and maintained through socialisation.¹⁰ Consequently, in order to understand an organisation's observable behaviour patterns it is crucial to understand its culture.

Schein differentiates between three levels of organisational culture,¹¹ the first (and surface) level being artefacts. These include the visible structures and processes of an organisation, the architecture of its physical environment, its style, emotional displays, observable rites and ceremonies and, not least, its products. In the case of the ICG, important artefacts are its reports, briefings, early warning alerts, commentary, blogs, media releases and speeches;¹² its website, including videos, podcasts, interactive presentations and photos;¹³ the public appearances of its members in the media, at conferences or before political committees; its offices and representations around the world; and organised tours and dinners for donors.¹⁴ Analytically, artefacts are the most visible and easily accessible manifestation of an organisation's culture, and as the level at which most interactions and exchange between the ICG and its environment take place, it is also here where most studies of the ICG's knowledge production and influence are located.¹⁵ For the study of the organisation's culture, however, the analytical problem with artefacts is that their internal/intended meaning is hard to decipher without an understanding of the deeper assumptions that guide the organisation's behaviour. In other words, there is a limit to what we can learn about the ICG as an organisation, its beliefs and values by looking at its reports and other artefacts only.

The second level of organisational culture comprises 'espoused beliefs and values'. It is here where the strategy, goals and philosophy of an organisation are located, publicly justifying its existence, mission and measures. In the case of the ICG, this type of information can be found on its website, in annual reports and, not least, in its anniversary brochure *Fifteen Years on the Frontlines 1995-2010*, which is the most comprehensive published piece of writing on its history. The ICG methodology, or the 'on the ground analysis to get the foot in the door, prescription to offer a way out of trouble, and focused advocacy to try to get somnolent, unwilling democracies to do the right thing'¹⁶ is located here too. Storytelling and other forms of oral or written history are an integral part of constituting and maintaining an organisation's espoused beliefs and values and the analytical inside track for their study.¹⁷ Yet again, contradictions/tensions, such as the latent tension between the ICG's field analysis

and its policy recommendations criticised by many academic commentators on ICG reports, may only be fully understandable through a study of its deeper values and beliefs.

The ‘unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings’, which form the ‘ultimate source of values and action’, are located at the third level of an organisation’s culture: its basic underlying assumptions.¹⁸ Contradictions showing at levels one and two can often be explained through the set of an organisation’s implicit assumptions, which analytically can be accessed through interviews with founders or long-serving staff members.¹⁹ While Schein assumes that these shared assumptions are by tendency compatible with each other and that contradictions rather arise at the levels of espoused values and beliefs and artefacts, Yanow has drawn our attention to the possibility of incommensurable values underpinning an organisation or the policy it promotes. In this view, ‘two or more equally valued but incompatible principles embodied within a single policy issue’ may be the source of publicly unspeakable goals or contradictions, which are often covered up by reconciling narratives, so-called organisational or policy myths.²⁰

An organisational or policy myth is defined as ‘a narrative created and believed by a group of people that diverts attention away from a puzzling part of their reality’.²¹ Such myths have a narrative form in that they are ‘not propositions of logic or arguments of rhetoric’, even though they usually consist of matter-of-fact statements.²² As social constructions, myths are public, rooted in particular cultures, times and spaces and reality for those who believe in and reiterate them.²³ Most importantly, ‘[c]onstructing the myth is not done explicitly or necessarily with the intention of deceiving or manipulating; rather, the myth is a product of tacit knowledge that is created tacitly and communicated tacitly’.²⁴ Its function is to veil tensions between incommensurable values that would create turmoil if spoken or discussed publicly, for example by undermining an organisation’s legitimacy and authority.²⁵ As a narrative, we can expect to find policy myths at the level of espoused values and beliefs of an organisation; the tensions between values, which the myths veil, are located at the level of the basic often-unspoken underlying assumptions.

In the following three sections, close-up readings of the ICG’s self-narrative and historiography are combined with background information about its founders and insights from interviews with long-term members/founders in order to explore some of the deeper assumptions of the ICG and their manifestation at the levels of espoused beliefs and values (anniversary brochure, website) and artefacts (ICG products). The focus of the study will be on the tensions between the three main elements of the ICG’s methodology: field-based analysis, policy prescriptions and high-level advocacy.

Mainstay field research? The ICG's dual mode of knowledge production

A central dimension of any organisation's culture concerns '[t]he shared assumptions that define what is real and what is not, what is a fact in the physical realm and the social realm, how truth is ultimately to be determined, and whether truth is revealed or discovered'.²⁶ In the case of the ICG, there are two competing modes by which 'reality and truth' are determined. One is in-depth field research designed to reveal the 'problem'; the other is extensive debate among senior members of the organisation determining the condensed conflict framings and 'solutions' presented in executive summaries and policy recommendations. This dual mode of 'establishing truth', however, is not without problems.

Field-based research and analysis is a major source of the ICG's symbolic capital, distinguishing it from 'armchair think tanks' based exclusively in western capitals and from media outlets lacking the means to ensure a permanent coverage of all conflict areas over long periods of time.²⁷ 'Operating in the field' is thus a key element of the ICG's work that is constantly emphasized: 'Crisis Group's analysts are drawn mostly from experienced former diplomats, journalists, academics and NGO staff, often leading world experts in their areas. Of 116 positions on 1 February 2014, 63 were based in the field in 26 locations.'²⁸ The group's position as a central knowledge entrepreneur in the international market of conflict-related policy ideas is based to a large part on this specific feature, which also feeds into the central storyline of the ICG as a unique organisation *sui generis*, expressed constantly in the ICG's publications and interviews with (former) staff members.²⁹

This message is visually underpinned in annual reports and anniversary brochures by photos showing ICG experts 'in the field'. For example, in the most recent annual report, we see 'Crisis Group North Africa Project Director Issandr El Amrani [...] meet[ing] with Libyan militia members in Sidra, Libya' and 'Crisis Group's Senior Libya Analyst Claudia Gazzini in Sidra port talking to militias who have blocked 40 per cent of Libya's oil exports'.³⁰ In its 15-years anniversary brochure, too, there are pictures underpinning the field-based character of ICG analysis, such as 'Crisis Group analyst Mohamed Jalloh in discussion with Lt-Colonel Mamadou Landho Barry, head of Guinean Inter-army Committee charged with elaborating a plan for restructuring the army, February 2010'; then Africa director 'Fabienne Hara with UN peacekeepers on the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia,

2002'; and one of the ICG's 'stars', Southeast Asia analyst 'Sidney Jones on the back of a motorbike, Jakarta, December 2008'.³¹

The mode of knowledge production at the heart of this part of the ICG methodology, stressed in writing and vision, can be summarised as, 'truth is that which experts reveal through field-based research and analysis'. This storyline draws strongly on the symbolic power of 'being in the field', rather than from academic methodology or comprehensive coverage. Compared to the vast areas in (potential) conflict covered by the ICG, its field presence, though permanent, is not as encompassing as the narrative suggests. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, the ICG currently has offices or representations in only five locations (Nairobi, Dakar, Abuja, Bujumbura, Johannesburg) with 18 permanent staff members (including four support staff), but covers a broad range of countries including 'Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe'.³² The amount of time and work that can be dedicated to each case is accordingly limited.

Despite an emphasis on field research and analysis, there is also a lack of information about the ICG's concrete research methods. 'Being in the field' as such does not say much about methods of data collection and interpretation. In this way, the organisation circumvents a central standard of academic field research-based knowledge production: the inter-subjective traceability of the research process, which would also have to include discussions of the quality of information and reliability of sources (for example, whether information was triangulated). This latter point is especially important in view of different actors trying to shape the perceptions of post-/conflict spaces in the 'battlefield of ideas', sometimes through one-sided or wrong information.³³

For the ICG field analyst, this might not be as problematic as for the outside observer. Many staff members have a professional background in academia and most probably adhere to field research standards by default, even though this is not made explicit in ICG information products for the sake of readability or informant protection. Referring to a report on Serbia in 2000 that provided an analysis based on out-dated fieldwork data and whose predictions turned out to be 'dead wrong', the anniversary brochure suggests that accuracy of information is crucial for the ICG's reputation and role. In this particular instance, the ICG had 'failed because it had strayed from its core methods, and [ICG President] Evans and others in the organisation took the wake-up call to heart'.³⁴ Against this background, it can be assumed that the ICG's field research usually aims at producing what Rüb has called

‘problem-oriented knowledge’, that is, knowledge that is interested in explaining and understanding a given problem as ‘accurately’ as possible.³⁵

Nevertheless, in the process of translating the problem-oriented knowledge produced in the field into policy recommendations, this knowledge does change its character because it is transformed into ‘success-oriented knowledge’.³⁶ In other words, knowledge and prescriptions have to be compatible with the world of policy-makers. According to its annual report:

In the initial drafting of reports and briefing papers, field analysts work with our regional program directors. A research and advocacy team in Brussels also provides input, especially on EU and NATO developments, while our Washington and New York advocacy offices assist with U.S. and UN perspectives, supplementing our national and regional advocacy in Beijing, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Nairobi and elsewhere. The policy prescriptions attached to Crisis Group reports are settled with input from field and senior staff, and Board members, as well as consultation with governments, inter-governmental organisations, academics and other think-tanks and NGOs.³⁷

The medium of translation is by means of discussions among different groups within (and sometimes outside of) the organisation – the ICG’s second mode of establishing ‘reality and truth’. According to a senior staff member of an ICG advocacy office, internal discussion is *the* central method in the process from initial field report draft to final published product:

There is a volume of exchange, internal exchange, in Crisis Group that’s – enormous. I mean we talk about everything all the time. It’s a very democratic organisation in that sense. The boss would submit certain things for consultation, everybody would come in and comment, and then they do synthesis in Brussels. But between the field and my office, for example, there is constant, constant, constant exchange. [...] So we would send a report [on policy discussions] to our colleagues and then they would send some feedback. [We say,] “This is our comment on it, this is an analysis on it but what do you think? Do you think that the UN mission in Libya has a good mandate now [...], and if not, then how do we influence that, that process?” My colleagues in the field engage with the UN mission [...] based on our report. So, it’s a very interactive kind of dialogue. [...] You know [laughs], everyone is involved in the

consultation: “What should we do? This is the situation. This is the state of play. What should we do?”³⁸

The ‘truth’ that finally makes it into published ICG products, especially its executive summaries and policy recommendations, is thus ultimately defined within the ICG as ‘that which survives conflicts and debates’³⁹. Problem-oriented knowledge established through field research forms the basis for such discussions, but only gains the quality of advocacy-compatible expert knowledge through extensive exchange of different views. This is judged by the long-term staff member quoted above as one of the ICG’s central strengths:

[T]his is an organisation that gives you a lot of intellectual freedom. There is very little censorship. [...] We have disagreements, you know, all the time. It’s absolutely not uniform, and sometimes we’re pissed off, and sometimes we lose an argument, that’s for sure, but at the same time there is commitment.⁴⁰

The underlying idea of inviting as many perspectives as possible on a report is ‘to strengthen the product and make it as good as we can’.⁴¹ ‘Strong’ and ‘good’ is defined in success-oriented terms, however, rather than in problem-oriented ones: it is a product which has a chance to have influence on policy-making within a given context of existing political positions and whose unintended repercussions are minimal.

While the ICG’s notion of ‘field research’ and ‘analysis’ as part of its ‘methodology’ uses the terminology of, and evokes associations with, academic research standards, the symbolic charging derived from ‘being in the field’ as such and ‘witnessing the situation on the ground’ seems to be just as important for the organisation’s perception as the actual contents of the analysis. Field presence bestows a particular, especially valuable, form of expert authority upon the ICG, and this function relatively increases in importance in the process of transforming problem-oriented knowledge into success-oriented knowledge.⁴² In the logic of knowledge markets, success orientation ultimately trumps problem orientation, as it is only ‘marketable knowledge’, or knowledge that is compatible with key policy-makers’ frames, values and positions with regard to central storylines, which will ensure a knowledge entrepreneur access to and influence on the policy-making process.⁴³ The following quote by Alain Délétroz, ICG Vice President (Europe), captures the different functions of field research (functional and symbolic) and the limitations posed by the success-oriented logic of advocacy well:

The principal pillar of our advocacy is the analysis coming from the field in the form of reports. [...] There are three basic elements to advocacy meetings. First, *the quality of our reports and the precision of our recommendations*. Second, *the way we present ourselves* when going into meetings. *We have to show that our colleagues on the ground know exactly what is going on and that we, here, speak the “EU language” and know what the EU and member states are debating and could realistically be asked to do* on a particular issue. Third, the politicians need to be reminded, particularly when they don’t want to act, that we have a lot of resonance in the media.⁴⁴

Field research is thus as much a functional part of the ICG’s work (gathering and interpreting information guided by ‘quality’ and ‘precision’) as it is part of its symbolic charging through ‘social theatrical performance’⁴⁵, or enacting the conflict expert authority claimed by the organisation by ‘showing’ the expertise and speaking the right ‘language’. At the same time, there is a limitation to what can be recommended under the success-oriented advocacy logic: that which policy-makers ‘could realistically be asked to do’.

Problem solving and successful advocacy may not be compatible in any case, and this potentially strong tension between the two values sometimes comes to the fore in the ICG’s artefacts, for example, whenever there are visible gaps between the analytical and policy-oriented parts of a report.⁴⁶ With reference to environmental movements, Maarten Hajer has shown that groups influencing governments are ‘haunted by the dilemma of whether to argue on the terms set by the government or to insist on their own mode of expression. In the latter case, of course, they run the risk of losing [sic] direct influence and therefore they often barter their expression freedom for influence on concrete policy-making.’⁴⁷ This is the very problem the ICG faces: by subordinating its knowledge production to success orientation, its work is more likely to put a lid on radical ideas than to promote them. The ICG’s self-narrative, however, tends to gloss over this tension at the heart of its knowledge production, emphasising the direct, untainted transmission of on-the-ground facts to high-level policy-makers:

Crisis Group provides information to mid- and top-level decision-makers *by directing that from-the-ground data directly to them*. The organisation has a large number of field-based analysts gathering information, and it hands that knowledge and analysis to all levels of government and international organisations [...]. In short, Crisis Group

cuts out the middle men in the information chain, and this leads to better informed policies.⁴⁸

This narrative of the unspoiled, unaltered and authentic ‘on-the-ground facts’ informing conflict-related policies is the myth repeated over and over in publications and interviews that masks what looms as a potential problem for the ICG’s legitimacy: the undermining of its expert authority based on field research by its ultimately success-oriented outlook in an international knowledge and advocacy market.

Moralist without high ground? The ICG’s flexible pragmatism

An organisation whose mission it is to ‘prevent and resolve deadly conflict’ is obviously built on a moral claim that violent mass conflicts are unacceptable and that their occurrence not only justifies, but actually demands political action to forestall or end (imminent) violence. This moral foundation also crops up in the self-image of long-term ICG staff, in which ‘integrity’ and ‘commitment’ differentiate them from other actors involved in international conflict management, as the following interview passage illustrates:

A lot of people like me worked for Crisis Group, then left and then came back – because we like it. It’s a good job; it’s a good organisation. People have integrity. [...] This is not the case at the UN or in political organisations, in other multilateral organisations. Everyone in Crisis Group is committed: to the organisation, to the goal of the organisation, to conflict prevention, conflict resolution, but at the same time committed to the people that live and suffer in the situations that we cover. [...]. They are all experts. They all have, I wouldn’t say roots, but they all have affinities, they all have developed relationships with people in the various conflict situations. So it’s a double commitment to... to not do too much harm, you know, on the ground, and also to the ideal and the goal of the organisation.⁴⁹

Against this background, an interesting observation is that the organisation tends to resist any form of characterisation, which includes distinguishing it not only from policy-implementing NGOs, but also from explicitly norm-based international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, which work through moral authority based

on fixed, non-negotiable values (human rights, political rights).⁵⁰ As the ICG's anniversary brochure recalls with regard to the organisation's founding principles:

In many respects the new Group was unique for what it was not: it was not designed to deliver humanitarian assistance; it was not a mediating body; it was not a human rights organisation, and it was not adverse to recommending international military intervention to end conflicts.⁵¹

The ICG's moral claim is closely linked to the idea that it advocates on behalf of the victims of violent conflict.⁵² Who the victims are and what can be done in order to end their plight is to be established through field-based research and analysis. This rather straightforward, unambiguous reasoning can best be understood against the background of the ICG's foundation history, which is closely linked to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s and, more specifically, the siege of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo by Serb forces. The founders' framings of the Sarajevo siege, the Bosnian war and the international community at the time played a central role in the establishment of advocacy on behalf of victims of violence as a central belief underpinning the ICG's organisational culture.⁵³ Names that stand out in this respect are Mort Abramowitz, Mark Malloch Brown, George Soros and Fred Cuny.⁵⁴

According to the ICG's foundation legend, the organisation's idea goes back to a joint flight out of besieged Sarajevo in 1993 of Mort Abramowitz, former US government member and diplomat and then President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Mark Malloch Brown, former head of the UN Development Programme, UN Deputy-Secretary General, and UK Minister for Africa, Asia and the UN:

The two men debated why it had been so difficult for the international system to effectively respond to Bosnia and other conflicts. An idea was hatched: to create an independent organisation that would serve as the world's eyes and ears on the ground in countries in conflict while pressing for immediate action. The concept of the International Crisis Group was born.⁵⁵

Abramowitz involved Fred Cuny, an American engineer with twenty years of experience in humanitarian aid work in different parts of the Third World, to develop the idea further. Cuny and Abramowitz had met and cooperated before. In 1991, Abramowitz had

helped Cuny to put into practice a humanitarian plan to rescue the Kurds of Iraq, who had been a target of Saddam Hussein's revenge in the aftermath of the First Gulf War. Cuny's plan was based on an unorthodox 'civilian-political-military alliance', which involved a certain amount of cunning and disregard of hierarchies and standard operating procedures, but was legitimised in the hindsight through its success in saving the lives of around 400,000 refugees and enabling their return home.⁵⁶ Abramowitz had also encouraged Cuny to write a paper on 'How the U.S. Military Could Assist Relief Operations in Somalia' in 1992, based on the aid worker's experience in the country, and had been instrumental in circulating the paper among US policy-makers.⁵⁷ In 1992/93, Cuny started working with financier and multi-billionaire George Soros, founder of the Open Society Foundations, liaised by Abramowitz who at the time was a member of Soros's advisory committee looking for innovative ways in which Soros could spend US\$50 million to rescue the victims of the Bosnian war.⁵⁸

In many ways, these different forms of cooperation can be seen as precursors of what would become the ICG methodology: combining policy recommendations based on on-the-ground knowledge with high-level advocacy backed up by comfortable financial means to ensure a certain independence as a non-governmental actor. Cuny is without doubt the prototype of the experienced expert that the founders had in mind for the ICG's field research and analysis.⁵⁹ His biographer, Scott Anderson, describes him as a person with a thirst for knowledge that served as his 'weapon' when working in disaster zones. Not only did he read everything he could gather about a place before starting a job; once on the ground he also 'asked questions of whoever crossed his path, from presidents to schoolteachers to illiterate peasant farmers, as he constantly took pulse and tried to learn more'.⁶⁰

Both Soros and Cuny shared the belief that crisis represented opportunity to foster change, a belief that explains their enthusiasm to help Abramowitz build up a completely new type of organisation filling an international information gap and seizing possibilities for political influence on conflict management that had emerged in the radically changed, post-bipolar international landscape of the 1990s. To date, the ICG reiterates this image as a completely different actor in its 'uniqueness myth'. Soros and Cuny also agreed that governments and international organisations often represented an obstacle rather than the solution in tackling societal problems and injustices including mass-scale violence,⁶¹ an idea visible to date in the ICG's 'lack of political will' storyline according to which solutions to violent conflict are often available, but are hampered by a lack of political will to implement them.⁶²

What also resulted from these early instances of cooperation is a rather simplifying view of wars and other forms of mass violence, which has to be read against the background of the Sarajevo siege and, later, the genocide in Rwanda. Anderson suggests that for Cuny the Bosnian war

[...] was about the most fundamental, black and white principles: not about Bosnians and Serbs, or Muslims and Christians, or even about the right to self-determination. Rather, it was a struggle between the forces of civilization and barbarism, and the rest of the world's failure to see it in those terms and act was a failure not just of will or vision but of the most fundamental morality.⁶³

Central points made here are also reflected in how Soros explains the reasoning behind the ICG's founding:

In January 1993, when I asked Mort Abramowitz, Mark Malloch Brown and others to tell me how my foundation could help the people of war-ravaged Bosnia, I never expected a long-lasting institution to emerge from the mission. We were all focused on very immediate concerns: the siege of Sarajevo and the daily disaster unfolding in all its horror before us. When they returned from that city [...] they also had a bigger idea. *The core problem*, they convinced me, was not just Bosnia at this moment but *the wider failure of the international community* to deal effectively with all the Bosnias around the world as they arise. Rwanda the following year drove the point home: *governments and other international actors simply could not, or would not, stop the worst crimes against human decency around the world*. "Never again" may have been a mantra for some, but it didn't seem to be an actionable policy for anyone.⁶⁴

There is a certain absence of ambiguity in the depictions of mass violence and the availability of clear policy solutions visible in these quotes that characterise the ICG's self-narrative and methodology to date. Not only are the solutions to conflict not as easily available as is suggested in the ICG narrative. Indeed, the very nature of conflict is less straightforward and unambiguous than these readings suggest.

The 'knowledge turn' in conflict and peacebuilding literature over the last decade has revealed the complexity of violent conflict not only in material terms, but also in terms of its intelligibility for both outside observers and involved actors alike. Veit, for instance,

highlights the informational uncertainty that characterised the situation in the DR Congo, recalling that as he ‘had the opportunity to speak to MONUC officials, militia leaders, and many other interviewees, it appeared to him that most of the time he took part in an ongoing process of interpretation of the respective other’.⁶⁵ Meanings may not be fixed and their (lack of) establishment part of the conflict itself. Other authors have shown, through different approaches, that the ways in which a violent conflict is imagined or framed, and how its causes and dynamics are made sense of through narratives that establish causal and temporal links, have a crucial impact on the ‘tools’ and ‘solutions’ adopted by intervening actors.⁶⁶ In addition, supposedly shared basic concepts such as sovereignty can have completely different meanings for different actors involved.⁶⁷ Finally, no matter how committed and informed outside actors are, there are structural reasons and immanent logics that keep the ‘international-local gap’ in peacebuilding interventions from being bridged.⁶⁸

This short overview of knowledge-related findings in the conflict and peacebuilding literature should suffice to cast doubt on simplifying narratives of conflict assigning clear-cut roles to (groups of) individuals. And indeed, even in the case of the relatively clear situation of besieged Sarajevo, where the roles of villains and victims seemed to be divided rather clearly between besieging Serbs and besieged Bosniaks, Cuny discovered the frustrating reality when the final steps of his major project in Sarajevo, a water filtering system, were obstructed by the ‘victims’ themselves, or Bosniak elites who were more interested in revenues from black-market sales of petroleum than in a secure water supply for the inhabitants of the besieged city.⁶⁹

It is not suggested here that ICG analysts have simplified understandings of the conflicts they are experts on; on the contrary, we can assume that their access to networks and information provide them with differentiated knowledge of the ‘situation on the ground’ and that they are aware of the challenges of intelligibility and interpretation of conflict. Nonetheless, the ICG methodology and self-narrative wittingly or unwittingly uphold the storyline of the readability of conflicts and the availability of practical solutions. The possibility of unambiguous moral judgements of blame and victimhood, based on the facts of the field, forms the basis for this storyline and is therefore an integral part of the set of non-negotiable beliefs at the heart of the ICG culture. That ‘field facts’ most often do not lend themselves to unambiguous conclusions, but are rather characterised by complexities and ensuing dilemmas in the choice of policies, is a tension in the ICG’s organisational culture that is not discussed publicly in its self-advertising publications.

This tension is also not attenuated by an explicit normative standpoint that would make the ICG's judgements easily traceable. Its moral claim of 'working to prevent and resolve deadly conflict' lacks any foundation other than the belief in being able to judge situations of mass violence correctly based on 'facts' and to derive the 'right' policies from these judgements. Not explicitly subscribing to norms such as human rights, liberal democracy or good governance, even though these norms undoubtedly play a central role in ICG reports and recommendations, serve the ICG's image as independent, non-partisan actor. Yet as policy recommendations always include normative-practical judgement, which cannot be made without some sort of normative standpoint, this neutrality is ultimately a myth. Not surprisingly, many critics have targeted the question of the organisation's implicit normative foundations, pointing to its deep roots in (neo)liberal governmentality.⁷⁰ What these studies have also shown is the depoliticising effect on the understanding of violence that goes hand in hand with the ICG's mission and reporting: violence (apart from that exerted by external interveners to end existing one) is represented as a societal pathology and not even taken into consideration as a means of political struggle.⁷¹

A second tension that the neutrality/independence myth veils is the ICG's deep entanglement with the international policy community. Despite ex-ICG President Gareth Evans's vision that the ICG would operate 'as a private foreign office, doing things that well-focused and well-resourced governments ought to be doing but often do not'⁷², the organisation's moral claim invests it with the role of a corrective of 'the international community' rather than just a functional role in the labour division of global governance. This is also expressed in staff members' perceived moral superiority over other international organisations' staff in terms of integrity and commitment. At the same time, however, the ICG's access to and possible influence on policy-making are dependent on the staff's formal and informal professional networks in this very policy community and on its Board of Trustees members' symbolic value and functional links.⁷³ In combination with the lack of a clear normative standpoint, this entanglement with the international policy community creates a constant need for the ICG to show its 'impact' on policy-makers and policy processes from agenda setting to policy formulation to implementation, as visible in the ICG's annual reports and on its website.

The potentially strong tensions between its moral claim and lack of an explicit standpoint and between the neutrality/independence claim and the group's political entanglements are ultimately veiled by the ICG's pragmatic flexibility myth:

Crisis Group is unencumbered by ideology, competing national interests or private gain, owing allegiance first and foremost to the facts on the ground. It aims to use all political and diplomatic tools available to further its mission of conflict prevention and resolution [...].⁷⁴

In the ICG's narrative, it is exactly the lack of an explicit moral standpoint that makes the organisation truly independent, non-partisan and flexible with regard to the political tools it may recommend, and again it is the 'field facts myth' that serves to uphold this claim.

Conclusion

The ICG's organisational self-representation and behaviour is based on a number of non-negotiable underpinning assumptions, which are characterised by tensions between incommensurable values or beliefs. The first main tension concerns the two different logics that, beneath the surface, drive the ICG's analysis and advocacy and produce two different, sometimes incompatible, kinds of knowledge. In general terms, field analysis tends to produce problem-oriented knowledge based on values such as analytical accuracy and comprehensiveness, while policy recommendations are rather driven by success orientation, that is, geared to ensure access to and influence on policy-makers. This manifests at the level of artefacts: not only do analyses and recommendations often not match neatly; at times, there seems to be an outright gap between differentiated analysis and formulaic policy advice.⁷⁵ As the market approach to political knowledge production suggests, knowledge entrepreneurs' success orientation, which presupposes knowledge that is 'marketable' and 'compatible' with policy-makers' ideas, values and positions, ultimately trumps problem orientation. This explains why the ICG's policy recommendations so often remain within the well-known frames and toolboxes of liberal international policy-making, despite the organisation's claim to also think outside of the box.⁷⁶ The myth constructed to cover up this tension is that of the direct, unfiltered link between field research-based knowledge and policy advice and advocacy, or the 'field facts myth', backed up by the self-image of a unique organisation *sui generis*.

The second main tension exists between the organisation's claim of moral authority – 'working to prevent and resolve deadly conflict' – and the lack of a clearly defined normative standpoint from which to make this claim. This rather blurry foundation in an opposition to

‘violence’ is problematic for two reasons. First, conflict research shows that violent conflicts are messy and categories such as perpetrator/victim or aggressor/defender not only hard to establish, but part of the struggle over knowledge construction about the situation in the first place. To assign parts such as villain, victim and bearer of guilt or hope is thus not as easy and self-explaining as the ICG narrative suggests and precludes the idea of objectively ‘right’ recommendations. Moreover, in the success-orientation logic the construction of narratives has to adapt to powerful interveners’ established storylines in order to be heard or have a chance of influence at all. In addition, by condemning violence indiscriminately, the ICG by tendency contributes to a de-politicisation of the use of violence with concrete consequences for the ‘policy solutions’ that are discussed or omitted. This might, indeed, have a pragmatic or even strategic reason. In a sense, de-politicised violence narratives give policy-makers and intervening actors leeway to impose their own strategic discourse on a conflict or an intervention, or ‘to politicise/interpret it’ in their way, and the ICG can plug into this, thereby hardly ever missing a target in terms of prediction, advocacy and impact.

Related to this is a further tension between the ICG’s self-narrative as a corrective of western governments/politics (hence its emphasis on independence and non-partisanship), while at the same time it is deeply entrenched with western/international policy circles through its staff members’ formal and informal professional networks and its Board of Trustees composed of former statespersons and other influential personalities. This tension is a potential threat to the ICG’s legitimacy/authority as ‘independent’ expert and creates a constant need for (or obsession with) policy impact. The lack of an explicit normative standpoint, and the problems deriving from this for the ICG’s claims of moral superiority to western governments and international organisations in the face of violent mass conflict, are covered up by the myth of ‘flexible pragmatism’, backed up by the ‘field facts’ and ‘uniqueness’ myths.

Taken together, the ICG’s organisational myths of field facts, uniqueness, neutrality/independence and pragmatic flexibility, inscribed in the ‘ICG methodology’, are the backbone of the organisation’s public expert branding. The tensions masked by these myths, however, crop up from time to time in its artefacts and the voiced assessments of both (former) staff and outside commentators. They loom ahead of the organisation, threatening to undermine the symbolic sources of its largely unquestioned expert authority, if discussed publicly. For consumers of ICG products, this means that there are caveats attached to its information and often high-quality analyses, and specific care should be taken in terms of

subscription to the ICG methodology narrative, which, as was shown in this article, is honeycombed with myths.

Acknowledgements

This article was written as part of the research of the cooperative network ‘Knowledge and Power in International Security Governance’, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Thanks are due to my interview partners as well as to Alastair Finlan at Aberystwyth University for extensive discussions and Roland Kostić at Uppsala University for very helpful comments.

Notes

¹ ICG, *About Crisis Group*.

² Ibid.; cf. ICG, *Fifteen Years*.

³ See also Bliesemann de Guevara’s introduction to this issue.

⁴ On the crucial role of stories in policy-making see Stone, *Policy Paradox*, 160-168.

⁵ ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 5.

⁶ See also Bliesemann de Guevara’s introduction to this issue.

⁷ ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 5.

⁸ Schein, *Organisational Culture*; Yanow, ‘Silences’.

⁹ Schein, *Organisational Culture*, 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 25-37.

¹² See <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type.aspx>

¹³ See <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/multimedia.aspx>

¹⁴ See <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/support/event-calendar.aspx>

¹⁵ See the other contributions to this issue.

¹⁶ Mort Abramowitz quoted in ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 6.

¹⁷ Schein, *Organisational Culture*, 133.

¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹ Ibid., 18.

²⁰ Yanow, ‘Silences’, 402.

²¹ Ibid., 401.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 401-402.

²⁴ Ibid., 402.

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- ²⁵ Ibid. In Yanow's case study there is far more at stake, namely the cohesion of the Israeli nation.
- ²⁶ Schein, *Organisational Culture*, 138.
- ²⁷ See also Bliesemann de Guevara's introduction to this issue.
- ²⁸ ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 5. For a critical discussion see in detail Kosmatopoulos in this issue.
- ²⁹ In ICG, *Fifteen Years*, the word 'unique' alone is used five times.
- ³⁰ ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 5, 16.
- ³¹ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 5, 21, 26. On Liberia/Sierra Leone, see also Bøås in this issue; on Sidney Jones/Indonesia see also Grigat in this issue.
- ³² ICG, *About Crisis Group*.
- ³³ See especially the contributions by Kostić, Fisher and Kosmatopoulos in this issue.
- ³⁴ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 23.
- ³⁵ Rüb, 'Wissenspolitologie', 350; cf. also Bliesemann de Guevara's introduction to this issue. Kostić (in this issue), however, shows that problem orientation may not always be what drives field-based knowledge production. In Bosnia around the year 2000, the ICG Balkans director seems to have been part of an informal US-dominated network of policy-makers, whose handling of information was clearly success-driven in that it was geared to impose their view on the 'right direction' of the intervention onto other members of the international community in Bosnia.
- ³⁶ Rüb, 'Wissenspolitologie', 350. One could argue that the aim to finally produce policy prescriptions already taints the problem-oriented knowledge production. While this is probably true, the main transformation seems to occur in the subsequent process.
- ³⁷ ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 4.
- ³⁸ Interview, senior/long-term ICG staff member, advocacy office, March 2012.
- ³⁹ Cf. Schein, *Organisational Culture*, 146.
- ⁴⁰ Interview, senior/long-term ICG staff member, advocacy office, March 2012.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² The discursive/symbolic functions of 'being in the field' and 'witnessing the situation on the ground' in domestic policy-making can also be observed in politicians' on-site visits in areas of conflict; see Bliesemann de Guevara, 'InterventionsTheater'; Bliesemann de Guevara, "Sich ein eigenes Bild machen". Cf. also Fisher (in this issue); Beswick, 'Aiding Statebuilding'.
- ⁴³ Nullmeier and Rüb, *Die Transformation*; Rüb, 'Wissenspolitologie', 350.
- ⁴⁴ Alain Déléroz quoted in ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 49; italics added.
- ⁴⁵ Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics'; Alexander and Mast, 'Introduction'.
- ⁴⁶ See especially Bøås in this issue on ICG's early Liberia and Sierra Leone reporting.
- ⁴⁷ Hajer, *The Politics*, 57.
- ⁴⁸ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 5; italics added.
- ⁴⁹ Interview, senior/long-term ICG staff, March 2012.
- ⁵⁰ On Amnesty International see Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*.
- ⁵¹ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 15.
- ⁵² See for example Mark Malloch Brown quoted in ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 14.

⁵³ Among the three main sources of organisational culture – founders, learning experiences, and new members – the impact of founders is the most important, as ‘[f]ounders not only choose the basic mission and the environmental context in which the new group will operate, but they choose the group members and bias the original responses that the group makes in its efforts to succeed in its environment and to integrate itself’.

Schein, *Organisational Culture*, 226.

⁵⁴ For different versions/mentions of the ICG foundation history cf. ICG, *Fifteen Years*; Anderson, *The Man Who Tried to Save the World*, 186; Soros, ‘My philanthropy’, 36. For Soros, supporting the ICG feeds into his idea of the ‘network of networks’, his ‘favourite formula of entering new fields of activity’ by cooperating with independent organisations and supporting them with substantial financial means; *ibid.* The author also interviewed Mort Abramowitz, Washington DC, March 2012.

⁵⁵ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 10. The brochure ‘evidences’ this birth moment with a photo of ‘Lionel Rosenblatt, then head of Refugees International, Mort Abramowitz and Mark Malloch Brown, at Sarajevo airport moments before coming up with the concept of Crisis Group, January 1993’; *ibid.* 14.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *The Man Who Tried to Save the World*, 103-117.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-128. Unlike Cuny’s Kurdistan plan, however, his Somalia recommendations were never put into practice.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128-151; Soros, ‘My Philanthropy’, 26-27. Cuny’s biggest project in Sarajevo was a water filtration system meant to make the besieged city autonomous from the costly and dangerous water supply via water transporters.

⁵⁹ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 10.

⁶⁰ Anderson, *The Man*, 192-193.

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 119, 128-131; Soros, ‘My Philanthropy’, 23, *passim*.

⁶² ICG, *Annual Report 2014*, 5.

⁶³ Anderson, *The Man*, 146.

⁶⁴ George Soros quoted in ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 11; *italics added*.

⁶⁵ Veit, ‘Figuration of Uncertainty’, 294.

⁶⁶ From the vast literature see e.g. for the case of Congo: Autesserre, *The Trouble With the Congo*; Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*; Koddenbrock, ‘The International Self’. In more general terms see Stone, *Policy Paradox*. Kostić (in this issue) shows how, because of this, some intervening actor in Bosnia strived to use strategic narratives, psy-ops and propaganda to frame and deliver dominant interpretations in order to justify their policy solutions over others.

⁶⁷ E.g. Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan*.

⁶⁸ E.g. Goetze and Bliesemann de Guevara, ‘The “Statebuilding Habitus”’; Hensell, ‘The International Scramble’; Smirl, ‘The State We Are(n’t) In’; Veit and Schlichte, ‘Three Arenas’.

⁶⁹ Anderson, *The Man*, 149-151.

⁷⁰ Cf. especially Bøås, Grigat, Hochmüller and Müller, and Koddenbrock in this issue.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; cf. also Kosmatopoulos in this issue on the idea of crisis reports as sentinel device.

⁷² ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 23.

⁷³ See in more detail Bliesemann de Guevara’s introduction to this issue; cf. also Kostić, Fisher and Kosmatopoulos in this issue.

⁷⁴ ICG, *Fifteen Years*, 5.

⁷⁵ See especially Bøås in this issue.

⁷⁶ With regard to the tools suggested in its policy prescriptions, the ICG states that, ‘Some will be within the current marketplace of received ideas; others will be over the horizon but nonetheless the right way forward.’ ICG, *Annual Report 2013*, 5.

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